



STRATEGIC GUIDANCE FOR INCLUSIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATION WITH CHILDREN

2024

FREDRIK BARKENHAMMAR



“State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child”.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 12

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1. MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

THE COUNCIL OF THE BALTIC SEA STATES (CBSS) has launched the “Secure Kids” project to enhance crisis preparedness and relief by effectively engaging children. This document provides a practical guide for communicating with children, including strategies to reach and involve children across CBSS member states. It specifically highlights the importance of including children’s voices in crisis preparation.

Children differ widely in language, education, culture, and socio-economic status across the ten CBSS member states. For instance, Icelandic children are more familiar with volcanic eruptions compared to Danish children. Socio-economic factors also play a significant role in children’s access to disaster preparedness information.

To communicate effectively, it is crucial to involve children directly in the development of communication tools and tailor plans to local conditions, focusing on relevant hazards. Segmenting the target group into smaller categories, such as age groups or non-school-attending children, helps address their unique needs. Prioritizing vulnerable groups, like children from immigrant or marginalized families, ensures they receive the necessary attention and tailored communication efforts.

The core recommendation of this communication strategy is to engage children through hands-on activities rather than theoretical explanation. Gamification makes learning enjoyable, and involving parents, especially in vulnerable communities, is crucial to reach the entire family.

Materials and exercises should reflect local conditions and hazards to be more relatable. Problem-solving exercises encourage critical thinking, while empowering children with responsibilities fosters a sense of ownership and encourages them to share information within their families. Facilitating workshops and discussions allows children to voice their ideas and concerns, integrating their input into communication strategies.

Written materials should use simple language, avoid jargon, and provide clear explanations of concepts like “evacuation” and “emergency shelter.” Practical tools and exercises, such as risk identification walks, packing emergency preparedness kits, role-playing emergencies, and involving goodwill ambassadors, can enhance children’s understanding and preparedness. Workshops on crisis awareness can help understand children’s perceptions and develop strategies together.

Finally, adhering to a strict Child Safeguarding Policy is essential when working with children to ensure their safety and well-being. The CBSS Child Safeguarding Code of Conduct outlines guidelines for protecting children from abuse and exploitation during these activities.

2. INTRODUCTION

THE MAJORITY AGREES WITH THE BASIC

presumption: Let's bring in the kids. So how do we do it?

In the project "Secure Kids", the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) attempts not only to reach children better in crisis preparedness and relief but also to bring their voices, needs and ideas into the process of preparing for crisis. ("Crisis", throughout this document, refers to natural disasters such as floods or extreme weather, civil hazards such as war or industrial accidents. In a "crisis" the consequences of an unexpected event are so immense that the affected population is not able to handle the situation without external assistance. This definition applies regardless of whether the "affected population" is a country of 20 million inhabitants or a family of three.)

This document is a practical guide for communicators. It provides guidance in reaching and communicating with children and contains examples of successful efforts and best practices from countries around the Baltic Sea.

"Children" is not a homogenous target group, not even around the countries of the CBSS-member states. Language, education system and culture differ in all ten states. And so does the regularity of natural disasters. In Iceland, where volcanic eruptions are a very imminent hazard, children are much more familiar with these forms of disasters than for example in Denmark.

Also, even if all CBSS-states are developed, industrialized countries, the social and economic status of children in each country may differ greatly. A comparatively wealthy and educated child is easier to reach, because it goes to school, generally participates in social activities and is able to devote a certain attention to disaster-preparedness-information. A child in immigrant families for example, possibly "illegal" immigrants or other marginalized groups are much more difficult to reach. Put another way: Reaching a homeless child or a family of paperless immigrants in northern Finland is a different matter than reaching the children of a family in a wealthy Copenhagen suburb.

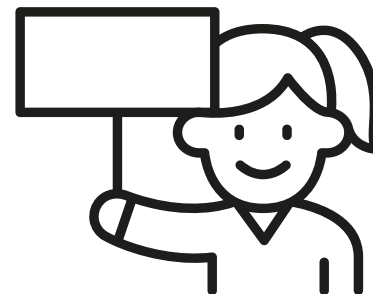
This guide recommends including the target group as much as possible when developing communication ideas. Reaching children is a matter of talking to children. Our advice to all who attempt to develop crisis-communication tools for reaching a young audience is: Involve your target group in the work. Ask them. Bring them into the process.



It is easy to educate the educated.

▲ Maja Brzozowska, Sociologist,
University of Poznan

3. PLANNING YOUR COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN



EACH COMMUNICATION PLAN is unique and has to be adapted to your local conditions. Before developing individual communication-tools, it is useful to formulate three basic thoughts:

Goal: What do I want to achieve?

Target group: Who do I want to reach?

Message: What do I want my target group to understand?

For example, this could look like this:

Goal: Educate all children aged 6 to 18 in Riga on crisis-preparedness

Target Group: All children in Riga, aged 6 to 18

Message: "If you know what to do in case of a crisis, you can save your life and the life of others."

In our example from Riga, a SMART goal would look like this:

"Educate all children aged 6 to 18 in Riga on crisis preparedness in the coming five years."

3.2. REACHING THE TARGET GROUP

It is essential to make a plan that is adapted to your specific needs and to the specific needs of your community. Focus on hazards and risks that are local and relevant to your population.

The most important step is to identify your target group. Who do you want to reach? The more specific this description is, the easier it will be for you to determine.

"All children in Riga aged 6 to 18" are many. It is useful to divide the target group in smaller bits:

- All schoolchildren in Riga aged 6 to 12
- All schoolchildren in Riga aged 13-18
- All children in Riga who don't go to school
- All children in Riga who don't speak Latvian
- ...

Vulnerability is connected to social-economic status. Less developed societies are more vulnerable to disaster. This is also true for children in low-income families or families with lower and lesser education.

The most difficult target groups will also be the most important to reach. Children in migrant families for example, who possibly don't speak the language of their host- country. Or children in families who often chose to live outside society, such as Sinti and Roma families. These vulnerable target groups may need proportionally more of your attention and resources, even if it is a smaller number of people. Devote extra resources to reach them.

A useful tool in finding your target group is the use of "personas". A persona is an imaginary person from your target group, to whom you attribute specific details such as Name, Age and where the person

3.1. GOALS

Set SMART goals for your campaign:

SPECIFIC

Be specific in formulating your goals. What exactly to you want to reach? The more specific, the easier it will be to identify tools and instruments to reach that goal.

MEASURABLE

Make it possible to measure your success. For example: "Train 1.000 Children in Finland in disaster preparedness in the coming 12 months."

ACHIEVABLE

Do not set goals that are too high. Make it realistic.

RELEVANT

Set goals that are relevant to what you want to achieve.

TIMELY

Set a time for your campaign for when it starts and when it is to be evaluated.

lives. Also include as many details relevant to crisis communication. This is best done in a brain storming session, with the campaign planners.

Persona 1 of 10 “Andris”

Name: Andris Berzins

Age: 12

Family: single child, divorced parents, lives with mother

Lives: Apartment in central Riga

Education: Goes to school, grade 6

Hobbies: Football, computer games, hiking

Main activities out of school: Spends time with friends; computer gaming

Experiences with crisis: School-closing due to a river-flood five years ago

Special vulnerabilities: Lives close to a river that sometimes floods

Motivation for engaging in disaster preparedness: Has experienced a flood; Is a socially active person.

Best-Practice Partnerships



We have worked with vulnerable youth groups for years. We have gone to schools and held information-talks. When we later approached children directly the families knew us from school. Parents trust the teachers. And the teachers trust us. That gave us a possibility to reach the parents in order to involve young people in our work.

▲ Ilze Norvaiša, TREPES Creative Association for Youth, Latvia

3.3. IDENTIFYING PARTNERS

The best way to reach the various target groups is to find partners with a natural connection to your audience. Schools is an obvious partner but also boy or girl scouts, sport groups or volunteer youth organisations such as the Red Cross or local or national firefighters.

By finding the right partners, there is less need to build your own network and connections. A civil-protection organisation may have a great network of disaster preparedness experts, but not a network of youth or children.

Make sure that your partners have their own interest in communicating risks. Only if there is a win-win for both, will it be a valuable partnership.

In our example, Johannes plays football, but it is not sure if a football-club actually has a interest in disaster preparedness. Maybe the school or boy- or girl-scouts are better partner.



Radošā apvienība jauniešiem
TREPES

UBC | UNION OF THE BALTIC CITIES



3.4. MESSAGES

Your messages are closely related to your goals. It is what you want to convey to the target group. The clearer your message is to yourself, the easier it will be to formulate it to your audience.

Formulate the message with your audience – children and youth – in mind. Adapt their position and think about how they will react to your message. Use your personas, in order to formulate a strong message.

A message is not necessarily a slogan. Making it clear and specific is more important than finding a catchy phrase.

In our persona-example above, Andris has a certain experience with flooding. He is also a socially active person and it is likely that he is motivated by taking responsibility for a situation that he knows is possible: “You can save the lives of yourself and your family by being prepared”.

Other Messages for a crisis-communication campaign for children can be:

- Disaster preparedness saves lives.
- You are important to the community.
- Disaster preparedness is fun and an adventure.

Your thoughts and ideas are important to us.

3.5. RESOURCES

This is the “A” for achievable in your SMART goals. Don’t plan more than you can handle. Involving children and youth requires face-to-face communication and direct involvement. That takes time. Make sure you have the funds and the people to carry out the campaign. Otherwise: scale down and make it smaller.

Persona 1 of 10 “Andris”

Name: Andris Berzins

Age: 12

Family: single child, divorced parents, lives with mother

Lives: Apartment in central Riga

Education: Goes to school, grade 6

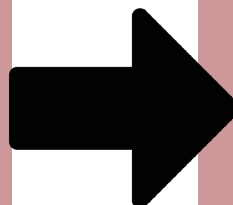
Hobbies: Football, computer games, hiking

Main activities out of school: Spends time with friends; computer gaming

Experiences with crisis: School-closing due to a river-flood five years ago

Special vulnerabilities: Lives close to a river that sometimes floods

Motivation for engaging in disaster preparedness: Has experienced a flood; Is a socially active person.



Message

You can save the lives of yourself and your family by being prepared.

3.6. CHECKLIST CAMPAIGNING

I have set specific and SMART goals for my campaign:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

My target group is:

1. _____
2. _____

I have at least three personas for each target group, they are:

1. Name: _____
2. Name: _____
3. Name: _____
4. Name: _____
5. Name: _____
6. Name: _____

I have formulated clear messages to convey to my target group:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Is it necessary to involve partners in order to reach the target group? Yes, my partners are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

No

My main messages for my target group are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

I need the following extra resources to conduct the campaign:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

3.7. PERSONA-CARD

Persona

Name: _____

Age: _____

Family: _____

Lives: _____

Education: _____

Hobbies: _____

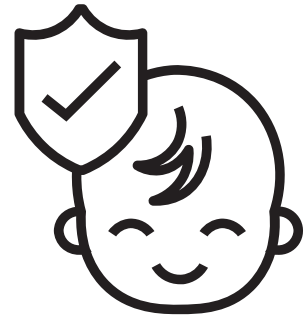
Main activities out of school: _____

Experiences with crisis: _____

Special vulnerabilities: _____

Motivation for engaging in disaster preparedness: _____

4. COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN



COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN means being active. You have to be a creative communicator; you have to make your audience participate and you have to listen. In this chapter, we have gathered a few useful ideas to facilitate your communication.

4.1. SEVEN ESSENTIALS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN:

1. Keep it practical

As adults we theorize and structure issues in order to understand them. Children process the information intuitively and directly. Keep theoretical frameworks and classroom-type lectures to a minimum. Instead of telling a group of Swedish children that the average sea level may rise 70 cm in the coming years, go outside and walk on the beach. How much is 70 cm? What does that mean for nearby houses? Make them think.

2. Gamification

We all understand things better, when we do them as opposed to when we are merely told them. Exercises are fun and the learning effect is greater. Especially for younger children, you can turn an excursion into a game by giving points or having your group take pictures of risks or hazards. It is ok to make it fun.

3. Bring in the parents

From a pre-study conducted by the CBSS in 2023 we know that adults are a great obstacle in reaching children. Parents who lack knowledge of risks and disaster preparedness can be an obstacle to reaching children. When conducting exercises, especially in vulnerable or uneducated communities, invite and involve the parents as well.

4. Make it local

Exercises and information material must reflect the situation of the community that is being targeted. It is no use conducting an earthquake exercise Helsinki, but it is certainly advisable in Reykjavik.

Schoolchildren in Tallin may prepare for the treat of being without electricity for a week. Finding safe places, knowing where to find information and being aware of the consequences, regardless of it is an earthquake or a black-out are common steps in disaster preparedness regardless of the type of threat.

5. Solve problems

Don't just tell but ask a question that triggers thoughts. How would you solve this issue? What would you do, if you parents were not here? Who would you call? How would you communicate if there is no electricity to charge your cell phone?

Children and youth can interview their parents on these issues. It is a great way to involve adults.

“Fear of giving too much responsibility to the children is a problem of the upper class. Kids in poor families take responsibility from a very young age.

▲ Ellen Khokha, The Growing Place Child Development Center, Santa Monica

6. Allow responsibility

Trust a child to take responsibility. Especially in socially vulnerable and lower-income families, children assume responsibility at an early age. Involving children and giving them responsibility is empowering and encourages them to pass the information on to their parents. That does not mean, putting a burden on a child being the disaster manager of a family. But in your communication with children, have the courage to take them seriously.

7. Listen

Make sure to give children and youth room to express their ideas. Listen to what they have to say and include these ideas in your work. Workshops where children can articulate their understanding of risks and disasters can be very valuable in developing communication material directed at children and youth.

4.2. WRITING FOR CHILDREN

Exercises and practical work should be the centre of your communication-campaign, but of course you may need written material as well.

Most importantly, children lack the experience of adults. A text for schoolchildren in Riga could include this passage:

“In case of severe flooding, many families may have to be evacuated to emergency shelters”

Concepts like “flooding”, “evacuation” and “emergency shelter” may trigger a picture in the heads of adults but leave kids blank. Make sure to explain what it is:

“A storm along the coast could push water into a river and make it overflow, like a pool with too much water in it. People who live nearby may have to leave their homes and live somewhere else until the water has sunk and it is safe to return.”

These are a few more tips and hints that are useful in all writing, especially for children.

1. Use simple language. Keep sentences short and avoid complicated words.
2. Write out abbreviations. “For example” instead of “f.e.”
3. Assume that the reader has no knowledge of the issue. This is true for most writing but especially when communicating with children. “Disaster”, “Crisis” and “Preparedness” are words that need to be explained, as in the example above.
4. Check your text from top to bottom. When something is not explained, your reader, especially children, will stumble upon it and eventually lose concentration.
5. Use examples and paint a picture. Abstract topics are easier to understand if you use an example or clarify what you mean by a mental picture.

Like for adults – but better”

The “Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency” (MSB) has developed a website, providing crisis information and preparedness information for children. In their guide “Writing for children about crisis”, they write:

We know that many authorities hesitate to write for children. A common argument is that it is difficult to know how. If someone asks us “How do you write for children?” we usually answer: “Like for adults – but better!”

In a crisis, everyone needs the greatest possible clarity – whether they are children or adults. As long as we are clear and simple, we don’t need to worry about going wrong. Think about how you wanted to be addressed when you were a child – write like that!

If you know children and young people, think about how you speak when you explain things to them. You probably try to be clear, specific – and respectful at the same time. You might try to provide good examples, and explain how the child is affected by it themselves.

An example:

- Don’t write like this: “In the event of a flood, the house may need to be evacuated.”
- Instead, write like this: “If there is a risk of flooding where you live, you and your family may need to leave home until the danger is over.”

Source: Writing for children about crisis, Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency MSB, translated from Swedish.

4.3. PRACTICAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Take a walk

Organize a walk around your city or community in order to identify hazards. Are there rivers that may flood? What consequences would that have? What would that mean? What happens if the electricity is cut off from the inner city? Children and youth can identify hazards on their own and these can be discussed with the organizers.

This is a great exercise to combine with adults. Either bringing the parents along for the walk or making a presentation of the results to parents.

Pack a backpack

What would you pack in your backpack to bring along, if you are forced to leave your home? This is a great exercise for understanding children's understanding of what a disaster is and what is important to them.

You can bring an actual backpack to a training session and fill it with things that are important in a disaster situation.

Role-play an emergency

You can divide a group of children into various roles and play out an emergency. For example:

1. Family affected by disaster (one or many)
2. Local fire-fighters as responders
3. Journalists
4. Police
5. Neighbours
6. Mayor / Community authorities
7. Youth-volunteers
8. School
9. Other affected groups

In the fictional case of emergency, these groups interact with each other. In preparing the role-play, each group is given an instruction on what their role and purpose in the game is. Throughout the game, a leader team brings impulses to the groups. At the beginning for example a flood may have caused an electricity-break. All groups have to handle this situation over time, improvising on what they would do. Throughout the exercise, more and more impulses are given to the groups by the leader-team. Let the game go on for several hours, so groups have time to improvise and come up with ideas.

There is no right or wrong. At the end, much time is taken to evaluate the situation and the various responses and actions taken by the groups. Why did they react the way they did?

Find good-will ambassadors

Young children look to their parents for guidance. Teenagers gradually emancipate themselves from their parents and seek other role-models. By making a partnership with musicians, actors or others with an obvious influence on youth, this opens a new way to communicate with young people. Your ambassador sets an example for your target group.

Workshop on crisis and disasters

If your group is school-children In Helsinki, go to the schools and talk to your target group. Ask children and youth what a crisis is to them. Conduct this as a brainstorming exercise, where for example everyone writes what a disaster is to them on a card. Explain that there is no right or wrong and then collect the cards and share the results with the group. Discuss with the youth why they define a crisis the way they do.

The next step is to imagine what the children would do in case of an emergency. How can you prepare for an emergency?

5. CHECKLIST FOR A DISASTER PREPAREDNESS BACKPACK

Water and Food

- Bottled water (You drink more than you think - up to 3 litres per day)
- Food that lasts (canned food, dried fruit, energy bars)
- Food for pets
- Can opener

Clothing and Sleeping

- Warm clothes (knit-cap, gloves, socks, long underwear)
- Good shoes
- Rain gear
- Blanket or sleeping bag

Health and Hygiene

- First aid kit
- Personal hygiene items (toothbrush, toothpaste, soap and other hygiene products)
- Medicine (Insulin-shots if you are diabetic, for example.)
- Diapers or baby-items for small children

Tools

- Multi-tool or Swiss army knife
- Flashlight (with extra batteries)
- Battery-powered or hand-crank radio
- Extra batteries
- Whistle (to signal for help)
- Waterproof matches or lighter
- Maps (Your phone may not work.)

Documents and Money

- Copies of important documents (ID, passports, insurance policies, medical records)
- Cash (small bills) and coins
- Emergency contact information (phone numbers to family or community centre)

Nice Extras

- A book
- Your favourite game, playing cards

6. CHECKLIST FOR A RISK-IDENTIFICATION WALK

BEFORE YOU START

- I. **Be observant:** What interesting or unusual things do you notice?
- II. **Ask questions:** Why might something be dangerous? How could it be fixed?
- III. **Discuss solutions:** What can be done to solve or reduce each hazard you find?

1. Traffic

- What busy streets with lots of cars can you find?
- Where are there no pedestrian crossings?
- Are there any traffic lights or signs that are not working?

2. Flooding

- Can you find low-lying areas that could collect water during heavy rain?
- Are the drainage systems clear or blocked?
- Do you see any signs of previous flooding, like water marks on buildings?

3. Storms

- Can you spot trees with dead branches that could fall during a storm?
- Are the rooftops secure with tiles or shingles in place?
- Do you notice any loose items that could be blown around in strong winds?

4. Fire

- Can you find buildings with old, wooden structures?
- Are there any places with lots of easy-burning materials (like trash or dry leaves) nearby?
- Do you see any fire escapes, and are they clear and accessible?
- Are there fire hydrants, and are they not blocked?

5. Health

- Are there any areas with overflowing trash bins?
- Can you see signs of pests like rats or insects?
- Do you notice any unpleasant smells indicating waste or sewage problems?
- Are the fountains or ponds clean or dirty?

6. Buildings

- Do you see any cracks in the walls or foundations?
- Are there buildings under construction, and is the area safely cordoned off?

7. Playgrounds and Parks

- Are there any broken equipment or unsafe surfaces in playgrounds?
- Are benches, tables, and other public furniture in good condition?

8. Is your community prepared?

- Where is the nearest police station and fire station?
- Can you find public information boards that provide emergency contact numbers?
- Are there any public buildings designated as shelters?
- Do you see public education materials about safety and preparedness?
- Does your school or community centre have a visible emergency plan?

7. CHILD SAFEGUARDING POLICY

COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN means involving children in your work. You will listen to their ideas, involve them in developing messages and exercises.

The responsibility, however, remains with the adults. Bringing children into the process is important, even essential for inclusive crisis communication, but requires extra responsibility from the organizing adults.

The Council of Baltic Sea States has developed a “Child Safeguarding Code of Conduct”, which contains these essential guidelines when working with children. It reads:

Staff, working with children must never:

- Hit or otherwise physically assault or physically abuse children.
- Engage in sexual activity or have a sexual relationship with anyone under the age of 18 years regardless of the age of majority/consent or custom locally.
- Develop relationships with children which could be deemed exploitative or abusive.
- Act in ways that may be abusive or place a child at risk of abuse.
- Use language, make suggestions, or offer advice which is inappropriate or abusive.
- Behave physically in a manner which is inappropriate or sexually provocative.
- Condone, or participate in, behaviour of children which is illegal, unsafe or abusive.
- Act in ways intended to shame, humiliate, belittle or degrade children, or otherwise perpetrate any form of emotional abuse.
- Discriminate against, show unfair differential treatment or favour to some children to the exclusion of others.
- Spend excessive time alone with children away from others in a manner which could be interpreted as inappropriate.
- Expose a child to inappropriate images, films and websites including pornography and extreme violence.
- Place themselves in a position where they are made vulnerable to allegations of misconduct.
- Take photos, audio or audio-visually record or otherwise depict children without their and their caregivers’ explicit consent.
- Collect, store or disseminate data about individual children.

Please find the full text provided by [CBSS Children at risk-unit](#) online.



SECURE
KIDS